Capabilities, capabilities, capabilities
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NATO Review

Military matters

Beyond Prague

Andrew Cottey, Timothy Edmunds and Anthony Forster examine military reform in Central and Eastern Europe and the capabilities of potential NATO members

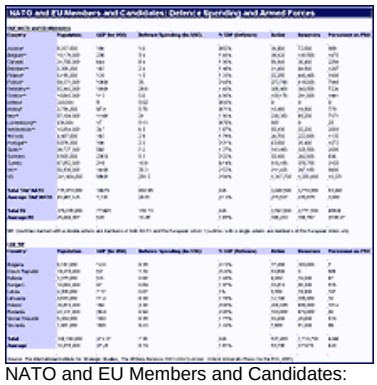
Entering the fray: Central and Eastern European countries have increased their contributions to international peace-support operations (© SFOR)

By the middle of the decade NATO and the European Union may have up to ten new members from Central and Eastern Europe. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia are widely thought likely to be invited to join NATO at the Prague Summit. Together with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, which joined NATO in 1999, these are also the countries from the region currently negotiating for membership of the European Union. The addition of ten new members from Central and Eastern Europe will add an important new dimension to the ongoing debate on defence capabilities and burden-sharing within NATO, as well as to the European Union's emerging European Security and Defence Policy. However, an issue that has not yet been adequately addressed is what the new members can and should contribute to NATO and the European Union militarily, and how their national defence reform programmes relate to wider collective NATO and EU defence-modernisation efforts.

If all these states are invited to join NATO at the forthcoming Prague Summit, the Alliance's total population will have increased from 735 million to 839 million since 1999 - an expansion of 104 million or roughly 14 per cent *(see table with data from 2000, the most recent year for which detailed comparative information is available)*. NATO's active armed forces will have increased by a similar proportion, from 3,448,590 to 3,986,045 — an expansion of about 16 per cent. Reserve forces, however, will have grown substantially in size, with the Central and Eastern European states bringing an additional 1,714,700 reserves to the "old" NATO's 3,774,000 - an increase of about 45 per cent. In contrast, the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of the Central and Eastern European states was only $372 billion in 2000, compared to $18,074 billion for the longer-standing NATO members - an increase of only 2 per cent in the Alliance's total GDP.

Figures for defence spending are similar. In 2000, the old NATO members spent $460 billion on defence, whereas the Central and Eastern European states spent $7 billion. Their accession to NATO will therefore result in a defence spending increase of only 1.5 per cent for the Alliance as a whole. These numbers illustrate a sharp reality. Although the total armed forces of NATO's member states will increase significantly as a result of enlargement, the new members are relatively poor when compared to the old members and the real resources they can commit to defence are much more limited.

National comparisons



NATO and EU Members and Candidates: Defence Spending and Armed Forces

National comparisons illustrate this point. Spain has a population of nearly 40 million people, with a GDP of $568 billion. By devoting 1.27 per cent of GDP to the military it is able to generate a defence budget of $7.2 billion that is used to support an active armed forces strength of 143,450. Poland has a similar population (nearly 39 million people), but has a significantly smaller annual GDP of $160 billion. Despite devoting a much higher proportion (2.06 per cent) of GDP to defence, at $3.3 billion its defence budget is less than half that of Spain's. In addition, it supports larger armed forces with an active strength of 206,045. Similarly, the Netherlands has a population of nearly 16 million people and a GDP of $347 billion. Allocating 1.87 per cent of GDP to defence, it has a defence budget of $6.5 billion, supporting active armed forces of 50,430. In contrast, Romania, with a population of more than 22 million people has a GDP of only $38.4 billion. Despite directing 2.45 per cent of GDP to defence, it has a defence budget of just under $1 billion, supporting active armed forces of 103,000.

Another way of comparing new and old NATO members is in terms of their contributions to international peace-support operations, including the NATO-led operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,* but also other UN-led or mandated missions. In 2000, the old NATO members contributed 63,293 troops to peace-support operations, while the Central and Eastern European states provided 4,294 personnel. The new member states would therefore contribute an additional 7 per cent to the peacekeeping forces deployed by NATO members - a significant contribution, but also less than their proportion of the enlarged Alliance's total population. Again, national comparisons highlight the point. Belgium with a

population of 10 million contributes nearly 1,500 troops to peace-support operations. The Czech Republic with a similar population contributes just under 700 soldiers. Latvia, with a population of 2.3 million contributes just over 100 troops to peace-support operations; whereas Norway with a population of 4.5 million provides more than 1,100 soldiers to peace-support operations.

Central and Eastern European states have faced major defence reform challenges since the early 1990s. Following the collapse of Communism, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia inherited Soviet-model armed forces structured for Warsaw Pact operations. It was generally recognised that these countries' armed forces were too large for the new international situation and high defence spending imposed too great a burden on their struggling economies.

In the early-to-mid 1990s, major cuts in defence spending were introduced which broadly reduced defence spending by half compared to the Cold War high of the late 1980s. In addition, the size of the armed forces was reduced significantly, forces were re-orientated away from their Warsaw Pact roles, most procurement was abandoned and training levels were reduced. The newly independent Baltic states and Slovenia faced the different challenge of building national armed forces from scratch (although in the Slovene case this occurred on the basis of territorial defence forces that had been created while the country was part of the former Yugoslavia). For these states, the initial focus was on developing lightly armed territorial defence forces.

Defence reform

Since the mid-1990s the Central and Eastern European states have - with NATO's support and encouragement - instituted further defence reforms. These have generally focused on further reductions in the overall size of armed forces and the development of forces capable of contributing to peace-support operations. The decline in defence spending bottomed out in the mid-1990s. Since then most of the Central and Eastern European states have introduced small increases in their defence budgets. The prospect of NATO membership has played a central role in generating political pressure for further defence reforms, contributions to NATO-led operations in the Balkans and increases in defence spending. Moreover, NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, its Planning and Review Process and the Membership Action Plan have provided an institutional framework for thinking through defence reform issues. As the table shows, the Central and Eastern European states now spend an average of 1.81 per cent of their GDP on defence - less than the old NATO average of 2.12 per cent but broadly comparable with the EU average of 1.85 per cent.

These developments have had a number of impacts. Most positively, the Central and Eastern European states have increased their contributions to international peace-support operations, in particular the NATO-led operations in the Balkans. Central and Eastern European forces that have participated in these operations have generally performed well and have gradually taken on more demanding roles. Participation in these operations has contributed to the professionalisation of the participating units. It may also have a positive trickle-down effect on the countries' armed forces more broadly, as soldiers are rotated into and out of the operations.

Central and Eastern European states have faced major defence reform challenges since the early 1990s

However, some critics have argued that the Central and Eastern European states are increasingly developing "two-tier" militaries, divided between elite cadres capable of operating alongside NATO Allies and the conscript-based bulk of the armed forces whose operational effectiveness is degrading. Indeed, reductions in defence budgets and the prioritisation of elite forces has often resulted in significant reductions in spending on maintenance, operations and training for the majority of the armed forces. For example, in 2000, Romanian Chief-of-Staff General Mihail Popescu acknowledged that 70 per cent of Romania's air force pilots were not operational due to insufficient flying time. Similarly, due largely to budgetary constraints, Hungarian pilots fly an average of between 50 and 75 hours a year. In comparison, the US Air Force considers 100 hours flying time a year a dangerously low amount. In the Hungarian case, this situation appears likely to continue for the foreseeable future, except in the case of 30 Mig-29 pilots who will be assigned to NATO missions.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe face continuing and serious problems in relation to defence reform. When they join NATO, their national defence dilemmas will increasingly become part of the wider defence capabilities and burden-sharing questions facing the Alliance as a whole. The relative poverty of the Central and Eastern European states and the many other social and economic problems they face mean that, even with increases in defence budgets, the resources available for their armed forces will remain limited. While there is broad political support for the United States' war on terrorism, the absence of direct and immediate threats to the Central and Eastern European states suggests that more dramatic increases in defence spending are unlikely in future. Central and Eastern European governments face the difficult task of reconciling their limited resources available for defence with their commitment to participate in international peace-support operations, the declining operational effectiveness of the bulk of the armed forces and postponed procurement decisions.

Defence reviews

Since joining NATO, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland have all undertaken new and important defence reviews. In each case, these recommended modest increases in defence spending alongside further downsizing of the armed forces and a move towards the establishment of largely volunteer, rather than conscript-based, forces. This points to one approach to defence reform: downsizing armed forces (both active and reserve) to free up resources to improve the capabilities and operational effectiveness of the remainder. How far this approach enables the Central and Eastern European states to resolve their defence dilemmas remains to be seen. More radical steps may be necessary to generate the resources required for a more wholesale modernisation of armed forces.

In an environment where ground invasion threats appear unlikely, it may make sense for Central and Eastern European states to place more equipment, such as tanks and armoured personnel carriers, into long-term storage and disband the associated units rather than attempt to maintain such forces at low levels of readiness. Moreover, all the Central and Eastern European states still have large reserve forces compared to the old NATO members. With conscription periods being reduced in duration (often to less than a year), conscientious objection and draft-dodging levels high and refresher call-up periods reduced in both frequency and length, the military effectiveness of these reserves must also

be open to question. As a result, this too might be an area where savings can sensibly be made.

On the assumption of a warning time of some years before any possible ground invasion threat, this strategy would imply a much longer-term concept of mobilisation that would rely on the ability to bring equipment out of storage and train new forces, rather than simply mobilise pre-existing reserves.

The Central and Eastern European states also face major procurement decisions. Having inherited Soviet-era equipment and postponed major defence purchases in the 1990s, this issue is now pressing. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are all engaged in controversial debates about whether to procure new fighter aircraft, which aircraft to buy and in what numbers. Even if undertaken with Western support and subsidies, the purchase of major equipment such as fighter aircraft and attack helicopters is likely to swallow up a large proportion of Central and Eastern European defence budgets. In 1999, for example, Romania cancelled its decision to procure US Bell 96 Cobra AH-1 attack helicopters after widespread criticism that the purchase was a largely symbolic gesture that could not be properly utilised or supported in the confines of the country's defence budget. And the Czech Republic has been forced to put off and possibly abandon plans to purchase 24 Gripen fighters as a result of the cost of this summer's floods in Central Europe. Moreover, the relatively small size of the Central and Eastern European states means that they are likely individually to procure only small numbers of expensive assets such as fighters, while duplicating much of the support infrastructure necessary for their maintenance.

Debate

There is a need for a more thorough debate on such procurement issues. For many of the Central and Eastern European states, it may well make more sense to allocate resources to ground-based air defences, airspace monitoring systems and developing base infrastructure for the forward deployment of aircraft from larger Allies. An alternative approach might involve the development of a few genuinely multinational squadrons of fighter aircraft - perhaps linking Eastern and Western European states, and even possibly including non-NATO members such as Sweden - designated to provide air defence for all participating states. This would reduce the duplication and costs involved in maintaining separate national forces, while giving military substance to the political principle of collective security. The successful development of a Danish-German-Polish corps illustrates the way in which joint forces can act as force multipliers and give substance to the NATO security guarantee.

Another related option is role specialisation, with states choosing to direct resources to areas where they have particular strengths while abandoning the attempt to maintain some other capabilities. The Czech armed forces, for example, have expertise in the area of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons defence. If this approach is adopted (even in part), more should be done to consider collectively at the NATO and EU level what specialist capabilities are needed, which states might contribute to these and how other states could then direct their resources elsewhere.

Moving further down the road of joint procurement, multinational forces and role specialisation may be difficult, however. Such ideas run counter to the understandable principle of maintaining the widest possible range of national defence capabilities as insurance against worst-case contingencies. They also confront the contentious problem of allocating the economic benefits associated with the production of equipment and maintenance of forces - as disputes among the various partners to Western European projects such as the Eurofighter illustrate. In the context of the ongoing debate about defence capabilities, these are problems for NATO and the European Union as a whole. Nevertheless, given their limited defence resources, the case for the Central and Eastern European states to follow this path is compelling.

Progress

Despite these difficulties, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have made significant progress in reforming their armed forces since the early 1990s. They have put in place mechanisms for democratic, civilian control of the armed forces and are now active contributors to international peace-support operations in the Balkans and beyond. In the space of a decade, the Baltic republics have gone from states with no armed forces to participants in the NATO-led missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Various countries from the region are already making, or have the potential to make, important specialist military contributions in niche areas such as nuclear, biological and chemical defence or de-mining.

Nevertheless, the Central and Eastern European countries also face serious problems in the defence field. The development of elite cadres capable of operating alongside NATO Allies has to some extent camouflaged the declining operational effectiveness of the larger part of these countries' armed forces. Air forces whose pilots fly too few hours to be ready for combat environments and ground forces whose equipment does not function adequately are of little use to either the Central and Eastern European states themselves or NATO as a whole. The relative poverty of these countries means that, even with modest increases in defence spending, they will not be able greatly to increase real defence expenditures.

Central and Eastern European governments and NATO as a whole need to acknowledge this reality and collectively explore possible ways forward. Solutions may involve more radical reductions in overall forces, the abandonment of some high prestige but expensive procurement plans, the development of more multinational forces and procurement projects, greater national role specialisation within NATO and the European Union, and the direction of more attention to the less glamorous aspects of defence policy such as training, operations and maintenance, and communications equipment. This will involve addressing difficult and sensitive issues, both nationally and collectively within NATO and the European Union. Without taking these steps, the Central and Eastern European military contribution to NATO and the European Union will be less than it could or should be, and the benefits of enlargement will not be fully reaped.

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Council *One Europe or Several?*. Further information can be found at the Civil-Military Relations in Central and Eastern Europe Internet Resource Centre (http://civil-military.dsd.kcl.ac.uk).

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* Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.